

## It's Not The Pain That Makes You Suffer

A summarised transcription of a Hillside Hermitage Dhamma Talk:  
<https://youtu.be/f8R1za5f9sl>

**Ajahn Nyanamoli:** Why is painful feeling a problem?

**Q:** It's painful and not pleasant.

**Nm:** Why do you prefer pleasure?

**Q:** It's not painful.

**Nm:** Why is it better? You realize you won't find an objective answer to it. You have an attitude of not wanting pain, and you have an attitude of wanting pleasure, and your whole life is dictated by that. But if you look at that attitude as to why it is there, you won't find an answer. It's gratuitous. That's the only reason for human suffering of any kind. And that's what the Buddha meant by craving means suffering. The absence of craving means the absence of suffering. Craving is that attitude. I want this, I don't want this.

If a person starts reflecting—not jumping into answering right away—why is my attitude regarding any physical or emotional pain—any disagreeable feeling that I'm experiencing—not wanted by default?

By asking yourself such a question—without providing a rational answer—you're becoming aware of that problem; the problem of your attitude. Sometimes you have to keep that question for days as a way of contemplation. You have to keep repeating it. Keep asking yourself. Look for an answer, but don't answer it. You're looking, but you are not allowing yourself to formulate it in a rational—psychologizing—manner. You must become aware—on that emotional level—of your resistance to the unpleasant emotion. You can give this or that answer, but emotionally, you'll still be resisting it, or you would still want to prolong it—if it's pleasure.

There is absolutely no justifiable reason for the craving to get rid of the pain. And if your attitude towards your feelings mattered, you would feel only what you want to feel. In other words, feelings would be obeying that attitude. But the fact that you're experiencing pain, which is not wanted, means you have absolutely no say in the domain of feeling. That domain is unaware of your wants.

Feelings feel; pleasant feeling feels pleasant, unpleasant feeling feels unpleasant; neutral feeling feels neither. That's it. You don't exist for it. Your attitude is a self-assumed parasite upon it, because of which you suffer. The pain does not experience the dukkha. There is the experience of pain, you are resisting it, and you experience the dukkha. That resistance is the problem, not the pleasure, pain, or the neutral

**Q:** Pain is inevitable.

**Nm:** Inasmuch as any feeling is inevitable for as long as you're alive.

**Q:** But the attitude of craving is optional.

**Nm:** It's not optional. You either have the attitude or you have undone it. Even the type of attitude is not optional, because, in pleasure, you will always be wanting more pleasure; in pain, you will always want to try and get rid of it; in a neutral feeling, you're always going to want to distract yourself from it. Your attitude is determined by the craving. What's optional is how you're going to go about it, but that's already far down the line.

Craving for more pleasure in pleasure. Craving for the absence of pain in pain. Craving for distraction, or oblivion, in neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling. That attitude can become apparent if you start questioning yourself regarding the presently enduring feeling, 'What am I feeling now?'

Something happened to you, somebody said something and you're upset. There is Pain. First, you have to stop projecting the blame, and responsibility onto the world for your pain. As long as you still think, 'I'm suffering, because such and such a person said this and that', you have a lot of work to do—as in you have many views to undo.

When you take responsibility for how you're feeling, and stop blaming the world, then you will be able to start discerning your attitude regarding your feeling as the only source of your suffering. A person who fully projects onto the world as being the reason for their suffering can never see that because they haven't taken responsibility for it. If you've taken responsibility for being affected by your feelings, you stop trying to talk things out with somebody who upset you. Of course, if that's done to maintain social norms, that's fine, but you don't do it as a means of escape from your feeling. You recognize that responsibility for being affected by what is felt is not on the circumstances, the elements, other people, and so on, it's on you.

Even if people are genuinely rude and mean to you, if you suffer, that's on you. That's why the Buddha said the wise monk, the one with the right view, would endure harsh words in the same sense you would endure the elements, heat, cold, hunger, and insects, because it's on the same level, it's just elements. But you being upset on account of it, that's on you.

To reveal the cause of your suffering, which is your attitude towards pain, you have to stop blaming pain for the problem. So the question is not 'Why is pain a problem?' but rather 'why do I have a problem with pain?'

Yes, the pain is not wanted. But why? 'Okay, I want it then!' Why would you want it then? Why do you have to either want or not want? Why can't you just be equanimous regarding either?

Any pain, big or small, if you stop trying to get rid of it, then the attitude toward pleasure also becomes apparent. Your wanting it will become obvious. And then stop entertaining it, stop trying to make it stay longer, stop trying to get more of it. By discerning the nature of your attitude towards pain, you automatically start discerning the nature of your attitude towards pleasure—the gratuitous assumption of sensuality—the sensual desire and pleasure you get from it. That doesn't mean you stop perceiving agreeable and disagreeable things; that's one thing, another thing is craving for or against those things.

If the nature of pain ceases to be a problem for a person, there's nothing else to do, because it doesn't matter where it comes from, from what sense, from what thought, from what experience, from what circumstance. If pain is not resisted; pain is not feared. But now sometimes people would go the other way, and overly indulge in pain as a means of showing that it's not a problem. However, that's still an act based on craving to get rid of the pain that one considers as the problem.

Suffering is the discrepancy that your attitude creates regarding the present feeling. If the feeling is pleasurable, you suffer when you want more of it. The discrepancy is wanting more of a pleasant feeling, as in not enough of it. If you were to stop wanting more of it, then you're only going to have a pleasant feeling, so there's no discrepancy—no suffering. Consequently, you have the unpleasant feeling present, and you don't want that presence at all, which means you're overdoing it now. There is some pain, but your attitude does not want any of it. That's another discrepancy you created.

If all you had is your attitude toward pain, you would be in control. But no, there is the actual pain there, and it's your attitude that contradicts it. 'No, this pain must not be!', while the pain is. 'This pleasure must be greater!', while it isn't.

When you feel neither pleasure nor pain paired with craving- you feel bored. And that feels unpleasant because your threshold of discernment of feeling is pain and pleasure. You don't even see the neutral one, and that's why it's unpleasant. It's a subtle discrepancy.

When you know that it is present, you stop contradicting it. No contradiction, no discrepancy; no discrepancy, no suffering. Suffering is a discrepancy created when your attitude clashes with the world. The world can present itself only in three forms, agreeable, disagreeable, and neutral. If you deal with that level, you don't have to worry about anything else more particular.

**Q:** How to deal with it on that level?

**Nm:** Take responsibility for whatever is being felt—as in, this feeling pressures me, because of my attitude towards it. I'm making the feeling affect me.

If somebody says something upsetting and pain arises, any suffering there is not in what's being said. It's not in that person. It's in your attitude regarding the circumstances.

You have to take responsibility for your suffering. You don't have to take responsibility for agreeable and disagreeable, but you have to take responsibility for wanting agreeable and not wanting disagreeable.

**Q:** What do you mean by taking responsibility?

**Nm:** It means seeing that it's on you. There is no excuse. When I suffer, I'm responsible for that. And only through that attitude, you can actually get a glimpse of how to not suffer. For as long as your attitude doesn't take on suffering as your responsibility, and conflates suffering with disagreeable circumstances—with painful circumstances—you're not going to see the nature of suffering. How then can you free yourself from it?

You have to stop blaming painful circumstances for your suffering. Suffering is not pain. There is pain without suffering, but there cannot be suffering without pain. If you remove your attitude of denial and trying to get rid of the pain, you won't suffer. If you remove your attitude of indulgence regarding pleasure, you won't suffer.

You can't decide to stop craving, 'Okay, now I will stop trying to get rid of the feeling of pain.' That's impossible. Only through understanding your attitude towards it, that attitude will be gradually cancelled out.

**Q:** When I feel pain, my mind jumps to blame the circumstances.

**Nm:** You can recognize that and think, 'Wait a minute! How many times has this happened? How many times will it happen? Do I have a say in circumstances? No. Why do I then keep inflaming myself with this attitude of blaming the circumstances? Because it just feeds the fire further, while I kind of know already that's not the problem.'

That's why indignation and anger need constant maintenance or constant action to make them valid. Constant blaming and trying to find the scapegoat for your suffering, 'It's his fault, It's their fault, Who's going to pay for this?'...etc. There are mistakes, and people do things that are unwise, and they are responsible for that. But, if you suffer on account of it, that responsibility is solely yours.

**Q:** If the body has a painful sickness, you still have to sort yourself out by taking some medicine.

**Nm:** That's all fine. You can be managing the circumstances. But, you don't want to be doing it out of trying to get rid of the suffering, because that requires you identifying suffering with disagreeable circumstances of an ailing body. How do you know whether you're acting out of it or not? Ask yourself, 'what if I don't take the medicine? What if I don't go and see the doctor? Am I going to get filled with anxiety regarding this? Am I going to suffer? Am I going to experience mental anguish?' If the answer is yes, it means you are still conflating suffering with circumstances.

Then you realize whether you give up the medicines, or not, that's not the problem. The problem is you confuse your suffering with a disagreeable feeling that has arisen on the level of an ailing body. You are making it into your mental anguish, because of the gratuitous attitude of trying to get rid of it.

Then you can take a further step and reflect, 'Okay, so there is work that needs to be done. In order to do that work I need to stay alive, so I'll take the medicine.' Then you take the medicine, as in borrow some time, so that you can uproot the problem. You don't take the medicine blindly.

**Q:** You've got to look after your tools.

**Nm:** Exactly. The body is a tool on account of which you can understand the nature of the body—the nature of non-ownership, and so on. And for that, you need it.

That is why the Buddha would encourage monks to wisely avoid a wild elephant, a snake, a charcoal pit, a wild pack of dogs, etc, because he would be foolish, before he has completed the work, to ignore the fact that those things might kill him.

You also don't go around with an attitude of health is good in itself, as health is the greatest value. If you do, you're going to be sorely disappointed. Health is a tool. And you can realize, 'Okay, my health's not perfect, but the tool is still good enough.' You can also then realize that you're able to go quite far with the attitude of it's good enough, because it is good enough.

It comes down to, 'well as long as I'm still alive, and my senses are still there, it's still good enough, even if I'm in pain and discomfort.'

**Q:** You don't have to go and seek out intense feelings to be able to practice.

**Nm:** Why would you do that? If somebody has that thought, where would that action—intention—be rooted?

**Q:** Fear of suffering.

**Nm:** Right there and then. So, you realize, 'I don't need to go out, because I just now revealed to myself that I'm trying to get rid of the suffering by thinking I'll go out and do something about it.'

That's where you get rid of the suffering, where you recognize your attitude in regard to the disagreeable feeling and don't act upon it. Endure it.

**Q:** There's always, for an ordinary person, a feeling and the attitude of craving present, and therefore the possibility for the right practice is also always present.

**Nm:** The work is always present, in the sense of being mindful or presently remembering the attitude towards the present feeling. In order to presently remember what is presently felt, you have to stop blaming the circumstances for the arising of that feeling. You have to take responsibility for it. You have to feel it. You have to allow it to be felt, but not try to get rid of it.

**Q:** I should be mindful of the craving attitude that is there in regard to what is felt.

**Nm:** You can't be mindful of the craving, as in, 'I'm craving and craving and craving...'. You can be mindful of the feeling, and then discern the nature of it. Your attitude of craving is always second to the feeling. It's inconceivable to be different. Once that which you have been prioritising is seen as second, it's not a priority anymore. If that attitude is not a priority, that's how the attitude starts to disappear. Through remembering the enduring feeling, you get to discern its nature and then the gratuitous craving will have to fade.

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